

NCA  
VOC FOR IOP/FN  
BACKGROUNDER 1-0372  
VAN SEROPIAN

MARCH 16, 1976

THE PRESIDENCY AND AMERICAN POLITICS

INTRO:

BEING IN THE WHITE HOUSE IS STILL AN EXTREMELY IMPORTANT ASPECT IN AMERICAN POLITICS AND THAT'S BEING DEMONSTRATED AGAIN IN THIS 1976 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION YEAR. VAN SEROPIAN HAS THIS BACKGROUND REPORT:

VOICE:

UP UNTIL A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO GERALD FORD PLANNED TO RETIRE FROM POLITICS IN 1976 AFTER WHAT WOULD HAVE BEEN TWENTY-EIGHT YEARS IN CONGRESS. BUT THEN HE WAS APPOINTED VICE-PRESIDENT AND AFTER RICHARD NIXON RESIGNED IN AUGUST OF 1974 IN THE FACE OF IMMINENT IMPEACHMENT AND REMOVAL, MISTER FORD BECAME PRESIDENT -- THE FIRST EVER IN THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY TO WIN THE JOB BY APPOINTMENT.

WHEN MISTER FORD ANNOUNCED HE WOULD SEEK ELECTION HE WAS VIEWED IN THE PUBLIC OPINION POLLS, AND EVEN AMONG FELLOW REPUBLICAN POLITICIANS, AS AN UNDERDOG FOR HIS PARTY'S NOMINATION AGAINST RONALD REAGAN, THE CONSERVATIVE FORMER GOVERNOR OF CALIFORNIA. NOW MISTER FORD IS NO LONGER THOUGHT OF THAT WAY; HE HAS SCORED FOUR PRIMARY VICTORIES OVER HIS CHALLENGER, IS EXPECTED TO WIN A FIFTH IN ILLINOIS TODAY (MARCH 16) AND NOW, DEFINITELY IS IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT.

ALL OF WHICH DEMONSTRATES THAT IT'S DIFFICULT TO DISLODGE A MAN WHO IS ALREADY IN THE WHITE HOUSE DOING THE JOB. BEATING AN INCUMBENT PRESIDENT IS NEVER EASY. IT HAS ONLY HAPPENED TWICE IN THIS CENTURY; ONCE IN 1932 WHEN THE GREAT

DEPRESSION AND THE PERSONAL MAGNETISM OF FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT COMBINED TO BEAT MR. HERBERT HOOVER. AND IN 1912 PRESIDENT WILLIAM HOWARD TAFT LOST THE PRESIDENCY TO DEMOCRAT WOODROW WILSON ONLY BECAUSE OF THE ENERGETIC THIRD PARTY CANDIDACY OF THEODORE ROOSEVELT AND HIS BULL MOOSE PARTY.

THERE HAVE BEEN ARTICLES IN THE NEW MEDIA RECENTLY CHARACTERIZING THE AMERICAN VOTERS AS TURNED OFF BY THIS YEAR'S ELECTION YEAR POLITICS -- CYNICAL OF POLITICIANS AND CONVINCED THAT BIG GOVERNMENT CAN'T DO MUCH FOR THEM. DESPITE THIS, THE MYSTIQUE OF THE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE REMAINS: THE MANIFOLD POWERS THAT THE OFFICE CONTAINS, AND THE MAN WHO WIELDS THEM, STILL ARE ENORMOUSLY IMPRESSIVE TO MOST AMERICANS. THE PRESIDENT CAN DO A THOUSAND AND ONE THINGS -- PROPOSE BILLS, SIGN OR VETO LEGISLATION, MAKE APPOINTMENTS. HE CAN SET POLICY WHILE HIS OPPONENT CAN ONLY MAKE PLEDGES ABOUT WHAT HE WOULD DO IF ELECTED. WHEN AIR FORCE ONE, THE PRESIDENT'S PLANE ARRIVES AT ANY AIRPORT IN THE COUNTRY, EVEN THE MOST BLASE OF ONLOOKERS FEELS A QUICKENING OF THE PULSE OVER WHAT THAT PLANE SYMBOLIZES. AND AMERICANS IN FLORIDA RECENTLY WERE NOT SO COMPLACENT THAT THEY WERE UNWILLING TO WAIT TWO HOURS IN THE RAIN FOR A GLIMPSE OF THE PRESIDENT.

ANOTHER FACTOR, BESIDES THE OBVIOUS ONE THAT THE PRESIDENT OCCUPIES CENTER STAGE, IS ONE THAT HAS TO DO WITH THE CHARACTER OF THE PRESIDENT HIMSELF. MISTER FORD BEARS A KINSHIP TO ANOTHER ACCIDENTAL PRESIDENT, HARRY TRUMAN. MISTER TRUMAN WAS WIDELY WRITTEN OFF IN THE 1948 ELECTION, A SURE LOSER TO GOVERNOR THOMAS DEWEY OF NEW YORK. SO WHILE MISTER DEWEY COASTED, MISTER TRUMAN, SEEMINGLY TO RELISH THE ROLE OF

THE UNDERDOG, WENT ALL OVER THE COUNTRY, MAKING SPEECHES AND GOT ELECTED. MISTER FORD, LIKE MISTER TRUMAN, IS THE INCUMBENT, AND WHEN THE CAMPAIGN FIRST BEGAN HE, TOO, WAS REGARDED BY MANY OBSERVERS AS THE UNDERDOG. BUT HE HAS SINCE PULLED TOGETHER AN EFFECTIVE CAMPAIGN TO TRY TO ACHIEVE WHAT MISTER TRUMAN DID.

-0-

JS/CAK